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Middle East-Africa

EGYPT-ISRAEL

Prospects for a negotiated peace settlement in the Middle East dimmed this week when Egypt's President Sadat, alleging Israeli intransigence, broke off talks between foreign ministers in Jerusalem after only two days of meetings. His move appears calculated to increase international and domestic pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Begin and underscores Sadat's frustration with Israel's tenacious approach to bargaining over what he considers peripheral issues.

Sadat wants to avoid protracted negotiations, which he believes will worsen his political position at home and in the Arab world. The statement announcing Foreign Minister Kamil's recall from the talks made clear that Sadat's intent is to force attention on what he regards as the two critical questions: whether Israel is ready to trade the occupied territories for peace, and whether it will recognize the right of self-determination for the Palestinian people.

Sadat's statement charged Israel with offering partial solutions, and asserted that Egypt would no longer haggle over side issues. Sadat seems particularly angry over Israeli attempts to retain the Jewish settlements and Israel's airfields in the Sinai. He feels these are poor substitutes for the security guarantees he has offered. In breaking off the talks Sadat played one

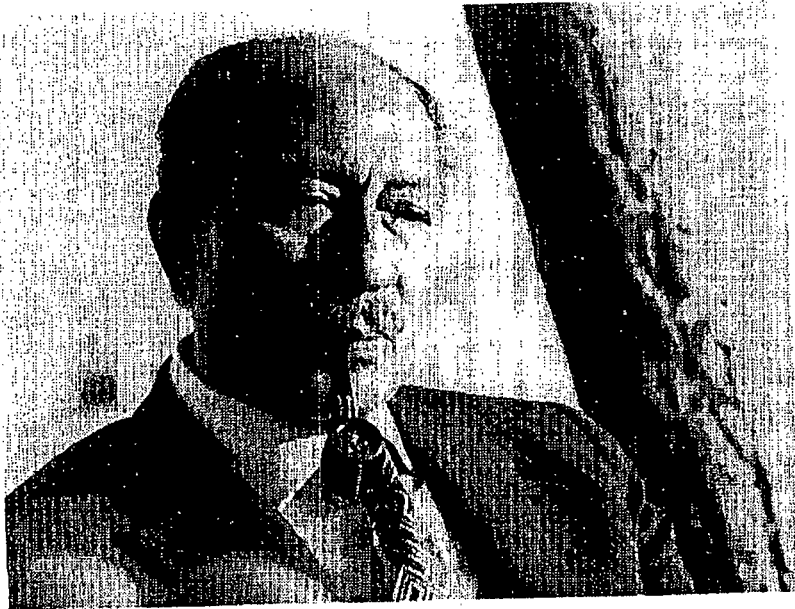
of his few remaining cards in the hope that the US and world opinion would pressure Begin into altering Israel's approach to the negotiations rather than risk their failure.

Sadat might yet employ the threat of resignation; he has said he would resign if talks became hopelessly deadlocked. Sadat has called a special session of the Egyptian People's Assembly—a favorite forum for dramatic announcements—for 21 January, and there are rumors in Cairo that he will offer his resignation. Any such move could be a ploy—part of an arranged scenario in which Assembly members would demand he continue in office. He presumably would accede.

Sadat has not abandoned the negotiating approach altogether. He already has reversed his initial decision to break off the military committee talks with Israel. Israel, however, will attend military talks only if political talks are also resumed, according to a press report. Sadat could also seek a new forum for political talks, perhaps offering to meet with Begin in Washington.

Sadat's tactics stunned Israeli leaders. Initially at least, he seems to have provoked a reaction in the Israeli Government opposite to the one he may have intended. Most Israelis are likely to regard Sadat's latest surprise as part of a war of nerves and a tactical device to bring international pressure—especially Washington's—on Israel to make further concessions.

Sadat's implicit threat to break off his peace initiative, therefore, could well lead to a hardening of the Israeli position. Although Israeli leaders may fear that prospects for a settlement with Egypt are slipping away, they are likely to be more immediately concerned about countering Sadat's efforts to portray Israeli "haggling" as jeopardizing hopes for peace.



President Sadat may still threaten resignation

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